

BOOK LAUNCH

*The Nobel Banquets: A Century of Culinary History
(1901-2001)*

by

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Speech by Tommy Koh
founding Executive Director, Asia-Europe Foundation
Chairman, National Heritage Board

Salutation

1 Professor K K Phua, Ambassador Ingemar Dolfe, Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

10 December 1997

2 I will always remember, with pleasure, the 10th of December 1997. I was the founding Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF). The Government of Sweden had invited me to speak at a seminar on human rights at Lund University. En route to Lund, I was invited to visit Stockholm and to attend both the Nobel Prize Ceremony and Nobel Banquet.

3 The 10th of December 1997 was cold and snowy. As Singapore did not and does not have an Embassy in Stockholm, I had to fend for myself. I walked from my hotel to the Music Academy where the prize giving ceremony was held and from the Academy to the City Hall where the banquet was held. I walked very fast in order to keep warm and worried that the falling snow would mess up my White Tie.

Stockholm City Hall

4 The Nobel Banquet was held in the Blue Hall of the Stockholm City Hall. When I walked towards the venue, I was greeted by a chime from a carillon in the City Hall's tower and the sight of 500 flaming torches placed around the Hall and by the quay side. Uniformed sea scouts stood with flaming torches in the courtyard. The music, light and festive atmosphere defeated the dark, cold and snow of the night and lifted our spirits.

1,346 Guests in 1997

5 I was one of the lucky 1,346 guests at the 1997 banquet. The demand for seats at the banquet far exceeded the limited capacity of the Hall. As a result, my host, the Swedish Ambassador to Singapore and ASEF Governor, Finn Bergstrand, could not get an invitation to the banquet.

6 I had been told, in advance, that the dress code was White Tie, and to wear all my decorations. After my return from my posting in Washington, D.C., I had given away my White Tie to a colleague

serving in Tokyo. As a result, I had to go to a tailor shop on Balestier Road to rent a White Tie. As for decorations, I took only two of my many decorations as I did not want to look like a Christmas tree. I was wrong, as the Swedish men wore all their decorations. It was a rare occasion where the men looked more splendid than the women.

Decor

7 The Blue Hall was very Scandinavian, simple, dignified, with bare brick walls. The Hall was, however, beautifully decorated with flowers. The theme that year was winter and all the flowers were white: carnations, orchids, kochia, calla lilies and amaryllises. The flowers were a gift from San Remo and the flower arrangements were created by final year students from the Florist High School in Norrköping.

Menu and Wine

8 I remember that the dinner ware, drinking glasses and cutlery had been specially designed for the banquet. They were beautiful. The menu always consisted of three courses: an appetiser, a main course and the Nobel ice-cream for dessert. The appetiser consisted of smoked salmon and lobster. The main course was pigeon. The highlight was the Glace Nobel. The 240 waiters and waitresses, all smartly dressed in their uniforms, descended the grand staircase, accompanied by torch bearers and musicians, each carrying in his or her left hand, a silver tray containing the Glace Nobel. I am told that the meal was prepared by a team of 20 chefs. 250 people provided the entertainment. I should not forget the four persons, whose job was

to uncork the 300 bottles of champagne, 300 bottles of wine, 180 bottles of dessert wine and the 50 wine waiters. You can imagine that after imbibing so much spirit, the happiness index at the banquet was very high.

Precision of Timing

9 The banquet had a coordinator, whose job was to ensure that the evening progressed smoothly and the precise time-table was adhered to. He is like the commander of our National Day Parade. At 6.35pm, the guests had to be seated. At 6.45pm, the laureates were presented to the Swedish King and Queen. In the meantime, we were served with champagne. At 7.00pm, the guests at the main table, 90 in all, walked in procession into the Blue Hall, to the accompaniment of organ and trumpet music. At 7.10pm, the King proposed a toast to the memory of Alfred Nobel. At 7.15pm, the appetiser was served to the accompaniment of music provided by a high school brass band. At 7.56pm, the main course was served to the accompaniment of more music. At 8.25pm, the dessert was served with a 20 minute musical entertainment. At 9.45pm, coffee was served. This was followed by a display of school standards by Swedish students and trumpet fanfares. Three of the Nobel Laureates were then invited to speak briefly.

Speeches by Nobel Laureates

10 In 1997, the Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded to three individuals, including Dr Steven Chu, the current US Secretary for

Energy. The Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to an Italian writer, Dario Fo. I remember that the Vatican had protested against the award because he had often criticised the Roman Catholic Church. The current controversy over the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, by the Norwegian Parliament, to Liu Xiaobo, is therefore not the first and will not be the last controversial decision. The Nobel Prize in Economics was awarded to two economists, Robert Merton and Myron Scholes, both of whom have been to Singapore.

11 I remember that Steven Chu and Dario Fo were two of the laureates who spoke at the banquet. I cannot remember what they said, except for one line from Steven Chu's speech: "We stand on the shoulders of giants". He was being modest and said that his success was made possible by the achievements of the many great physicists who had preceded him. At 10.10pm, the banquet was over and those who wished to dance, adjourned to the Golden Hall.

Conclusion

12 As I had no partner to dance with, I decided to go back to my hotel. Although it was snowing heavily, I did not fear the cold and the snow as I walked back to my hotel because my heart was filled with joy. The Nobel Banquet was probably the most famous dinner I have attended in my life.

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